



## ***Fire and Rain***

*"Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice . . . meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling."*

*(1 Kings 19: 38, 45, NIV)*

After three and one half years of obscurity and hiding, Elijah emerges to challenge the prophets of Baal to a very public showdown. Mount Carmel, one of the most fertile places in Israel, is where the confrontation between God's prophet and the false prophets of Baal took place.

I am sure that, by this time, the lush slopes of Carmel were brown and bare. In a real sense, Carmel was a picture of what God's people had been and what they had become.

But it was here on Carmel, that God would demonstrate both His power and grace to His people. It was here that God would *begin* the *process* of drawing His people back to Himself. We see this in the fire and we see it in the rain.

The fire that fell that day reminded the people that their God was a living God. He was the same God who, many years before, had entered into a covenant agreement with His people through the fire and lightning of Mount Sinai. He was the almighty, all powerful, eternal God of the ages. So great was his display of power that day at Sinai that the people shook with fear and said to Moses, ". . . do not have God speak to us or we will die. (Ex. 20:19, NIV)

The fire that fell on Carmel reminded Israel of the God of the covenant, the God of fire on Sinai. On their faces, noses pressed in the dirt, they cried out, "The Lord – He is God. The Lord – He is God." (1 Kings 18:39, NIV)

Yet, not only did the fire fall on Carmel, but also the rain. If the fire demonstrated God's power, the rain announced His grace. It was at Mount Sinai that God declared to Moses that He was "compassionate and gracious . . . slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." (Ex. 34:6, NIV) That day on Mount Carmel, God demonstrated His covenant grace through the rains that fell.

### **Judgment and Mercy**

The fire and rain that fell on Carmel that day not only demonstrated God's power and grace, but also his mercy and judgment. The sacrifice that Elijah offered was the sin sacrifice. According to the law, the bull that was quartered and laid upon the altar was to be completely consumed by fire. The fire represented God's wrath and judgment on sin. By falling on their faces when the fire fell, the Israelites were crying out for God's mercy.

But the prophets of Baal stood. Neither bending their knees nor bowing their heads in God's presence they chose to defy God. They refused to cry out for mercy. The result was judgment, so that we read that the brook Kishon flowed red with blood as the people put to death those who had led them away from God.

In a very real sense, the events that happened that day on Mount Carmel point ultimately to Mount Calvary. For it was on Calvary that the fire of God's judgment fell on the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the ultimate source of both God's judgment and mercy. To acknowledge the living God as seen in the cross is to experience His grace and mercy through Christ. To reject the God of the cross ultimately leads to judgment. In this sense, the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal represent two very different responses to the cross of Christ.

The American Indians who lived on the prairies of the Western United States used to protect their villages from the raging wild fires that occasionally swept uncontrolled through the plains. To do this, they would burn a controlled fire in a circle around their village. As long as the people of the village remained within the circle they were safe from the fire.

It is a simple illustration, but in a real sense it describes the reality and power of the cross of Christ. The fire of God's judgment fell on His son, Jesus Christ. As we gather round the cross, acknowledging Christ as Lord we can be sure that we are safe from the fire of God's judgment, because the fire cannot fall where it has already been. But for those who live outside the circle, the fire of God's judgment is an inevitable reality.

Let us draw near to the altar of the cross. It is there that we will experience not only the power and presence of God, but also His great mercy and grace.

### Think About It

1. God's presence through the fire fall on Mount Carmel was both an awesome and frightening thing. It reminds me of the proverb which teaches us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7, NIV) What does the fear of the Lord mean to you? How does it lead to knowledge?
2. We often see the cross of Christ as the display of God's grace and mercy, but I wonder about how well we understand the other side of the reality of the cross – God's judgment on sin. What can the cross teach us about the "fear of the Lord?"